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RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 9619
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 4420
RUEHKP/AMCONSUL KARACHI PRIORITY 1034
RUEHLH/AMCONSUL LAHORE PRIORITY 6731
RUEHPW/AMCONSUL PESHAWAR PRIORITY 5655
RUEHUNV/USMISSION UNVIE VIENNA PRIORITY 0111
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 ISLAMABAD 000284

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PK](#) [KNNP](#) [PARM](#)
SUBJECT: PRESIDENT ZARDARI DISCUSSES AQ KHAN RELEASE

REF: (A) ISLAMABAD 267 (B) ISLAMABAD 280

Classified By: Anne W. Patterson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S) Summary: President Zardari assured the Ambassador on February 8 that A.Q. Khan would remain under house arrest and not engage with the media. Minister of Interior Rehman Malik also insisted that Khan would be prohibited from talking to the press and politicians, and his movements would be curtailed. Zardari and Malik speculated to the Ambassador that Pakistan Muslim League-N (PML-N) party leader Nawaz Sharif was about to run A.Q. Khan for the Senate on his party's slate. The Pakistani Government claims that they were trying to establish a legal basis for Khan's detention, as he had been restrained previously by the Ministry of Defense "for his own security." However, the timing of the court decision obviously took Zardari by surprise, reflecting the GOP's persistent lack of coordination and message control. Now the government is trying to catch up. End Summary.

¶2. (S) President Zardari assured the Ambassador on February 8 that A.Q. Khan would not talk to the press and would remain under strict control. Ambassador conveyed that the release of A.Q. Khan, the world's most serious nuclear proliferator, aggravated by Khan's press conference on his front lawn thanking Zardari and Interior Minister Rehman Malik for his release, was a very unfortunate signal to send to the world. For the United States, it was particularly unsettling coming on the eve of Ambassador Holbrooke's visit and as the U.S. Congress considered assistance and trade bills for Pakistan. The U.S. was seeking a commitment that A.Q. Khan would stay out of the press and his movements would be restricted as before. Zardari argued that referring Khan's detention to the Islamabad High Court was designed to prevent Khan from receiving a Senate ticket from PML-N leader Nawaz Sharif. "Where would I have been then?" Zardari said. Zardari said he would be sure that the police who were stationed at Khan's house would not "pamper him."

¶3. (S) Minister of Interior Rehman Malik also reassured the Ambassador and DCM in several phone calls and meetings that A.Q. Khan would be kept under wraps; he would not talk to reporters or politicians, and his movements would be strictly controlled. Malik reported that President Zardari, who heard about the court decision from the Ambassador and then Pakistani Ambassador to the U.S. Haqqani and not his own ministers, had been annoyed about being blindsided. Malik told us that there had been no previous legal basis for the Khan detention. (Note. This is true. The head of Pakistan's nuclear "Strategic Plans Division" Lt. General

Kidwai has often told us that there was no legal basis for the Khan detention except to provide for his own security. End Note) Malik said repeatedly that the press conference had "gotten out of hand" and the press had rushed to Khan's house even before the decision was announced. xxxxx End Note.)

Media Reaction

¶4. (U) Unsurprisingly, Khan's press conference was widely covered by the electronic and print media. All papers ran Dr. Khan's "triumphant" photograph above the fold showing him waving to the media and public supporters at his residence. Stories included the international reaction with particular emphasis on the U.S., U.K., France, and India expressing "concern" about the decision and declaring Khan "a danger for world peace." Articles and editorials questioned how free Khan actually was and speculated on the contents of the secret Annex A. The Urdu press noted that "people came out on the roads, raised slogans in favor of Dr. Khan, and distributed sweatmeats." Urdu editorials unanimously praised the decision and protested the "Hue and Cry Over Release of Dr. Khan" (Islam), "Pakistan's Rejection of Charges of Nuclear Cooperation" (Jang), and "Maltreatment of Dr. A.Q. Khan at U.S. Behest Does not Benefit Us" (Jang). Dr. Khan's gratitude toward the Government of Pakistan was underscored in a widely reported quote that he is "grateful to the President, the Prime Minister, and the Interior Advisor Rehman Malik."

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¶5. (U) FM Qureshi and the MFA issued the official reaction for the GOP; their remarks were aimed at minimizing foreign reaction by repeating all that Pakistan has done to recover from Khan's misdeeds: dismantle his network, assist the IAEA, build up its export controls, and strengthen its nuclear security. Qureshi noted that the government maintains the right to appeal the court's decision. The English Daily Times editorial on Sunday argued that Khan's release will not make the government more popular and may cause problems with the international community. English language Dawn suggested the real proliferation problem was not Khan's network, but the discriminatory nature of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty.

¶6. (S) Comment: The Islamabad High Court is firmly under the control of the government, so it would appear that this was a planned move by some government element, probably Rehman Malik in a too clever by half move that was not coordinated with Zardari. Malik, who has aspirations to become Deputy Prime Minister (or even Prime Minister) often has good political judgment, but he failed badly this time. There was not even a hint publicly that Nawaz Sharif ever intended to nominate A.Q. Khan for a Senate seat. Moreover, the new court decision would not make Khan's nomination any less probable. This fiasco demonstrated yet another example of amateur, uncoordinated governance in Islamabad, and Nawaz will waste no time in exploiting this misstep. We will continue to monitor Khan's freedoms to determine if the GOP is implementing the restrictions that they promised to continue imposing on Khan.
Patterson